



# Anna Maria and the Zing of Siam

By Jeff Corydon III  
(photos by Jeff Corydon III)

Most Bay area folks are familiar with Anna Maria island as a vacation destination, but the tiny city of that name at its north end—population 1,814—is not widely known. Since the elegant and refreshing Siam Garden Resort opened near Anna Maria’s village center some months ago, that’s begun to change.

The resort is fortuitously grandfathered into a residential block where, for decades, a rustic fishing camp and then a low-priced transient motel used to be. The new owners have rebuilt the dilapidated structures of yesteryear from the ground up into Anna Maria’s first upscale tourist haven.

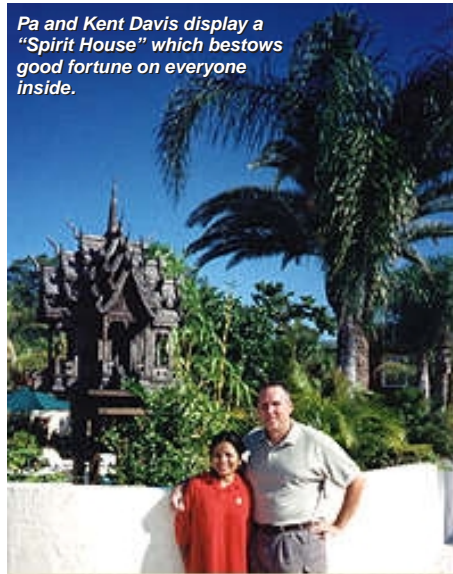
Co-owner Kent Davis began visiting Anna Maria island in 1983, vacationing with his parents at Holmes Beach. A marketing consultant, he traveled a lot and, in the 1990s went to Thailand on business for what became five years.

There he met his Thai wife Sophaphan (incongruously nicknamed “Pa”), and the couple hatched plans for a scenic resort in historic Anna Maria themed to historic Thailand. Returning to the United States, they bought the present site and began building two years ago. They opened last March, and now live at the resort and run it personally.

Anna Maria town is as peaceful as any place around Tampa Bay, and its residential north end is the quietest part. Probably more bicycles whisk by the resort entrance on Spring Avenue than automobiles. And what cars go by drive slowly. That ‘25 MPH’ sign at the town line is serious, and has plenty of patrol cars backing it up.

The resort’s front wall enhances tranquility by putting the real world out of sight. Decompression starts the moment you enter the cloistered courtyard from an outside car-park.

Pa Davis might be inclined to attribute this to the influence of her authentic Thai ‘Spirit House,’ perched above the wall near the entrance. “In Thailand, every business must have one out front,” she explained as we checked in, “According to Thai tradition, it protects the premises



Pa and Kent Davis display a “Spirit House” which bestows good fortune on everyone inside.

from evil and bestows good fortune on everyone inside.” But there are also other causes for your laid-back feeling. For instance, those stately palms swaying over the spectacular swimming pool. And all the blossoms and greenery bordering a Key West-style, terra cotta pathway that goes to your suite.

The accommodations Kent and Pa have fashioned from remnants of the former property are a miracle of transformation. Every suite features stylish furnishings, draperies, wall hangings and statuary with an oriental flavor. Elephant figures smile from your bed’s headboard and bedspread, curtains, lamp shades, wall murals and assorted knickknacks. They’re unmistakable signs of where your magic carpet landed. The elephant has links to the Siam founding dynasty’s mythological origin and is a Thai royal family emblem.

The focus on antiquity stops at your kitchen, which features modern appliances, including a microwave, and a generous set of utensils, dishes, glassware and silver.

All but three of the guest suites will accommodate up to four persons. Eleven have a double-bed and a Futon sleeper, while two have only the bed. The last suite, with an extra room and double-bed, puts up six. Eight of the ground level units feature spacious walled front terrace

gardens with umbrella-tables and several armchairs. Two of the four upstairs suites have balconies overlooking the courtyard.

The spanking new 40x20-foot double-kidney swimming pool across the pathway from the ground floor terrace gardens is encircled by yet another garden strip.

While Kent was getting things built, Pa turned the courtyard into a colorful arboretum. Luxuriant shrubs, ferns and flowers typical of Asia predominate, many bought at Sarasota’s oriental markets and the Tampa area’s Thai temple.

Pa put in all but the large trees herself and spends several hours daily tending the gardens. Her pride in the result shone brightest when she took time to guide a tour of the property’s nearly 100 different species of plants.

She reeled off their names as lovingly as a mother would her children’s. From brilliant orange royal poinciana and birds of paradise, to blood-red Hawaiian lobster claws. From purple-and-white oyster flowers to swan blossoms resembling little white birds. And delicate, lavender-tinted Siamese orchids.



“Eventually, it will be like a jungle,” she confided. “We want everything to grow profusely, so the garden looks rich like in Thailand. Pruning things back is not my style.”

Along with the plants, Thai wood carvings, statues and ceramic pieces pepper the gardens. The most impressive include a huge carved teakwood elephant which welcomes you at the courtyard entrance and a painted, life-size bronze statue near the pool of Prat Apimanee, mythological hero of an epic story by



area provides picnic shelters, open-air tables and grills, restrooms and a shower.

Back at Pine Avenue, opposite City Pier, is Bay View Plaza, Anna Maria's only real shopping mall. It hosts the town post office, a few casual wear and jewelry shops and a unique gift boutique called The Museum Shoppe that specializes in nautical stuff.

The Plaza also has two pleasant eateries which, with City Pier restaurant, afford non-cooking resort guests several options. The Waterfront restaurant serves three meals daily, while the adjacent Mama Lo by the Sea coffee shop and ice cream parlor features breakfast, sandwiches, soup and sundaes until 9 pm. You can buy Mama Lo's gourmet coffee to brew in your suite, or drink a cuppa here while scanning the day's news free.

When we checked out, the Davis's reminded us the resort is a work in progress. If we returned in a few months, the gardens would be more enchanting still. "Our concept conjures up lush foliage and exotic plants," said Kent. "As the gardens grow naturally and wildly, each terrace will become a truly private enclave where you can sit outside and not see anyone else. It's going to create an ever cozier environment-- a great place to honeymoon or read a book. Even write one!"

*The resort's website at: [www.siamgardenresort.com](http://www.siamgardenresort.com) details accommodations and rates and provides information on Anna Maria and its history, all profusely illustrated. Map and directions are included. The resort address is 512 Spring Avenue, Anna Maria Island, FL, tel: 941-778-2000, and e-mail: [kent@siamgardenresort.com](mailto:kent@siamgardenresort.com)*

Thailand's equivalent of Shakespeare.

A hundred yards east of the resort down Spring Avenue is the coastal road. From there, it's a block to Anna Maria's heart, where Pine Avenue meets the City Pier. The pier was built in 1911, before the island had bridges, for boats from St. Petersburg and Tampa. It goes out 736 feet, including a terminal wharf with a bait shop and restaurant.

Local anglers fish off the pier around the clock. As we went out to the City Pier restaurant, one told us the fishing is as fine as the restaurant fare. "You can catch anything that swims in the Gulf," he said, "from sharks to tarpon." Moments later we were enjoying beer-battered popcorn shrimp and, sure enough, watching dolphins at play in the bay by the restaurant's wall-to-wall windows.

About 200 yards north of City Pier is Bay Front Park, a ten-minute stroll from the resort. If you'd rather not walk, there's free roadside parking. (Anna Maria doesn't permit on-street parking.) The park's broad sand beach slopes into emerald waters where, far out beyond, loom the majestic Sunshine Skyway and St. Petersburg's skyline. A large recreation

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